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Temporalities of Emergent Axiomatic Violence in Brexit Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Following an acrimonious referendum on European Union membership, the UK was plunged into chaos as people attempted to negotiate a deeply divided domestic political landscape. In Scotland, things were further complicated by the independence question and the Scottish National Party's (SNP) call for a second independence referendum. In light of the Brexit result, since 2016 many citizens of Scotland have re-thought their position on independence owing to emergent axiomatic violence located in the UK's split from Europe. This article examines the different temporalities involved with the emergent axiomatic violence of Brexit as experienced in Scotland. For those who once supported the Union, Brexit is understood as a moment of violent and unforeseen rupture, emerging from a one-off event in the present. In contrast, nationalists speak of Brexit as representative of the accretive slow violence brought on through historical imbalances in UK politics; Brexit was to be expected, emerging from long-term processes. For EU migrants, the violence of Brexit is built into their futures, as they contemplate work and family life in a drastically changed socio-political landscape. Although the 'emergent' aspect of the violence inherent in Brexit is dependent on perspective, all agree that the violence is axiomatic, part of everyday life in Brexit Britain.

KEYWORDS

Brexit; violence; temporality; nationalism; Scotland

Introduction

The 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum – commonly referred to as the 'Brexit referendum' – saw the UK vote 52% to 48% to leave the European Union. The result was received across much of the UK with unadulterated shock, perceived by many as a form of rupture which tore away European, cosmopolitan futures to reveal an isolationist, right-wing culture many could not identify with. The immediate aftermath of the vote also brought with it a continued heightened feeling of violence across the UK, in particular towards EU migrants who saw a significant spike in racist and xenophobic attacks (Reed-Danahay 2020; Guma and Jones 2019) increasing

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animosity between many ‘remainers’ (who voted to stay in the EU) and ‘leavers’ (who voted to withdraw) who found their differences irreconcilable.

The Brexit ballot encapsulated much more than the simple binary question presented to voters on European Union membership; it was a vote on the identity of the UK as a nation, and how it was to be perceived in relation to global political and social movements in the future. It was a vote against the cosmopolitan, pro-immigration multiculturalism that had defined the UK since the post-war years (Knight 2017; Franklin 2019) and was commonly believed to be driven by the rise of right-wing populism across the country; a cry of pain from those suffering at the hands of neoliberal Westminster policies (Rapport 2020). Immigrants were scapegoated, stereotyped, and abused whilst right-wing personalities rose in popularity on the back of an alternative vision of the UK rooted in nostalgic imperialism and anti-immigration sentiments that sought to ‘free’ the UK from Europe’s ‘liberal elite’. In this way, Brexit was not only a political vote on European Union policies, it was an identity protest vote driven by feelings of cultural and historical loss (Franklin 2019; Koch 2017).

The significance of the vote meant that across pro-EU media landscapes and anthropological spaces the unexpected Brexit result was discussed as a moment of violent rupture: a result that brought immediate and sensational visibility to a before and after in UK politics and public consciousness (Green et al. 2016). ‘With most I am sharing an injury’ lamented Michael Carrithers in Sarah Green’s edited post-Brexit forum, ‘We are now a small “we” who have suddenly lost the right to speak among a much larger “we” beyond the shores of this island’ (Carrithers 2016, 483). This kind of political rupture is often in itself inherently violent. If the resistance of nationalism involves the deconstruction of its claims to essence that hold sway over time and space, ‘any insistence on essence or attempt to fix an identity smacks of violence’ (Holbraad et al. 2019, 6). For most pro-EU voters, then, Brexit was a violent event in the most traditional of senses, an event that is perceived to be immediate, sudden, rupturous, marking a before and after characterised by physical, psychological or symbolic damage (Nixon 2011; Bosi and Malthaner 2015). Three years on from the vote, these feelings of isolationist, racist and neo-imperialist violence culminated in the election of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister, a man known for his overtly xenophobic opinion columns in the right-wing magazine *The Spectator*. Now, politics in the UK is said to be more divided than ever, with shifting ‘leave’ and ‘remain’ alliances promising to change the political landscape for years to come.

In Scotland however, Brexit is perceived along a number of different axes, the ‘remain’ and ‘leave’ politics further complicated by the question of independence and the civic Scottish National Party’s (SNP) pro-EU stance. Having voted strongly in favour of remaining in the EU (62%), Scotland now finds itself in the unique position of having to leave the EU against its will. The SNP, who have put forward a vision of ‘independence in Europe’ since the 1980s, has taken this opportunity to present itself – and Scottish independence – as the antithesis to Brexit. They have driven a strong campaign for a second independence vote based on Scotland’s Europhile voting pattern, arguing that independence is now necessary so that ‘Scotland may remain in Europe as it voted for’.

Following 15 months of fieldwork amongst SNP activists in Edinburgh, I explore here the ways in which the question of Scottish independence has influenced perceptions of

Brexit amongst veteran SNP activists, new SNP activists who joined the party post-Brexit, and European migrants in Edinburgh who recently joined the SNP as a form of resistance to Brexit. Although they are all now pro-independence supporters to some degree, each group understands the violence of Brexit with varying urgency and intensity, according to different temporalities, and influenced by their relationship to Scottish independence or their migrant status. For those who once supported the Union, Brexit is understood as a moment of violent and unforeseen rupture, emerging from a one-off event in the present. In contrast, nationalists speak of Brexit as representative of the accretive slow violence brought on through historical imbalances in UK politics; Brexit was to be expected, emerging from long-term processes. For EU migrants, the violence of Brexit is built into their futures, as they contemplate work and family life in a drastically changed socio-political landscape. Even though the ‘emergent’ aspect of the violence inherent in Brexit is dependent on perspective, all agree that they believe it is part of everyday life for the foreseeable future – that is, that it is axiomatic.

The New Appeal of the SNP

The SNP has long preached pro-EU civic nationalism, aligning itself with other regional sovereigntist movements whilst emphasising a residency-based definition of Scotland (Torrance 2017). Since its inception in 1934, the SNP has, to varying degrees, presented itself as an internationalist (McCrone 2002), pro-European Union (Keating 2001), civic nationalist (Keating 2009) party, whose primary concern is the democratic imbalance between England and Scotland rather than the question of ethnic belonging. It has further been described as a liberal nationalist movement rooted in nineteenth-century liberal ideals (Hearn 2000). Following its rise to power in the devolved Scottish parliament in 2007, the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014, and the subsequent 2016 Brexit fallout in the UK, the SNP has taken extreme care to present itself as the antithesis to right-wing nationalisms that have been resurfacing across Europe, utilising this contrasting political position as further proof of its commitment to civic- rather than ethno-nationalism (Virdee and McGeever 2018; Rzepnikowska 2019).

Scottish nationalists have long since believed their parliamentary democratic rights to be overruled and controlled by the UK government, an argument that has formed the basis of their brand of civic nationalism for decades (Torrance 2017). Since the re-branding of the SNP in the 1980s, nationalist arguments for independence have been driven by the desire for self-determination and a vision of a liberal Scotland in Europe. The argument presented by them and their membership has been as follows: Scotland wishes to be a left-wing, liberal nation, yet it is shackled by the right-wing UK Parliament, therefore, for Scotland to be the country it wishes to be, it must become independent. Of course, the SNP occupies the somewhat privileged position of holding a third-party status in the UK and currently opposing a right-wing Conservative government, allowing them to fulfil the role of protest and opposition. It is yet to be seen whether they could sustain such an approach if opposing a left-wing government or in the case of independence.¹ However, in the current situation their strong pro-EU stance and civic nationalist visions have never been more publicly appealing than in contrast to Brexit, creating complex responses amongst its members and those who had once rejected the Scottish independence project. As one SNP activist told me,

people are waking up, this whole Brexit thing has exposed the UK for what it is ... people here in Scotland are finally realising that it's not us that have the nationalism problem ... I welcome new members aye, hard to forgive them for the No vote [in 2014], but now we can join Europe and be truly European, not half in half out. That's what Scotland wants.

This strong pro-EU stance that the SNP is now offering as an alternative to Brexit encouraged voters in Scotland to re-consider their previous anti-independence positions, with many who previously opposed independence now viewing it as the only escape to the political violence sparked by Brexit. In contrast, veteran SNP activists I interviewed and followed on campaigning runs understood Brexit within the context of slow violence (Nixon 2011), seeing their democratic and social rights eroded over decades, if not centuries. Finally, the SNP's EU stance has also served many in Scotland not only as an island of safety from Brexit rhetoric but as a form of resistance towards the violence of anticipation (Griffiths 2014), indeterminacy and liminality that occurred between the Brexit vote and the date the UK was to leave the EU. For many, joining the SNP and actively campaigning for an independent Scotland in Europe became a form of resistance, a way of repelling the UK's anti-EU stance and the stagnation that Brexit liminality had imposed on them.

Violence of Rupture

From Anti-Independence Activist to SNP Supporters: Remainers and Brexit

On the night of the referendum in 2016, leaving the EU still seemed unlikely – a distant dream of the Eurosceptic right wing, doomed to falter before the might of the European status quo. Polls had consistently predicted a pro-EU victory, and everyone in Scotland – my SNP informants recall – seemed quietly confident. 'I hadn't met a single person that wanted to vote for Brexit' lamented Ann as we climbed up and down tenement buildings delivering SNP propaganda through letterboxes for the 2019 European Parliamentary Elections. She was one of the many middle-aged and middle-class SNP activists in Edinburgh who had joined the party the day after the Brexit vote, the unexpected result radically shifting her previous anti-independence position. She had spent the first half of 2016 campaigning for the EU where she had found common ground with SNP activists. At the time she had been surprised by this crossover and the comradeship she developed with the SNP who, as a unionist at the time, she had always considered 'the enemy in chief'. 'I can't believe it wasn't the SNP that destroyed us in the end' she followed, 'I can't believe England² did this ... I can't believe the vote was allowed'. Much like Ann, throughout their campaigning in Edinburgh, many SNP activists and pro-EU campaigners alike had encountered little to no resistance to their unapologetically pro-EU messaging, often sharing bewildered remarks with the electorate in the street: 'how could we possibly leave the EU?' It seemed that for once, nationalists and unionists alike had found a cause that united them.

As the cosmopolitan epicentre of Scotland, home to three multinational universities and the largest European migrant population in the country, it was not surprising to find such fervent pro-EU support in the streets of Edinburgh. This stood in stark contrast to other parts of Scotland – particularly the North-East – where EU membership was a highly contested topic even amongst SNP members.³ Despite this, the feeling of Scottish pro-EU unity seemed unwavering for my Edinburgh SNP informants who firmly

believed in Scotland's commitment to the European cosmopolitan project. This sentiment was particularly strong for those I interviewed who had previously supported the Union before joining the SNP in 2016 as a result of Brexit, most of whom cited their wish to remain in the EU as their main motivation for voting against independence in 2014. For them, a vote against independence had been a vote in favour of the cosmopolitan European project that the UK offered. The flip from this position so clearly offered to them by the UK only two years earlier seemed inconceivable.

As the first 'remain' result rolled in from Gibraltar, the fate of the Brexit project in Scotland seemed sealed, with the leader of the pro-Brexit party, Nigel Farage, publicly conceding defeat on the night of the referendum. To rise the next morning, then, to a successful Brexit vote was nothing short of a violent rupture in the most traditional of ways: an event 'immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, erupting into instant sensational visibility' (Nixon 2011, 2). Waking up to Brexit has been described to me by unionists in Edinburgh in such immediate and spectacular terms, a moment that marked a radical before and after punctuated by negative, painful feelings. Unionists in Edinburgh described waking up to Brexit as 'life altering', 'earth shattering', 'incomprehensible', and above all, 'traumatic', a moment of rupture in which the UK's isolationist and xenophobic inclinations came to sensational visibility for them, shattering the cosmopolitan pro-European consensus they had assumed to be integral to the identity of the nation (see Knight 2017).

This forceful form of discontinuity that unionists in Scotland experienced on that fateful morning is deeply entangled with their identity as anti-independence supporters. Back in 2014, when Scotland held its independence referendum, unionists (who favoured Scotland remaining part of UK) feared that Scotland leaving the union would mean leaving the EU, a risk many were not prepared to take. Membership of the EU took centre stage in the unionist campaign at the time, with unionist parties (Labour and Conservatives) arguing that the only way to remain in Europe was to remain in the UK. As a whole, the Scottish National Party worked hard to emphasise its commitment to the European project, however, they ultimately failed to reassure pro-European Scots that Scotland would maintain its EU status after independence, and the referendum was narrowly lost: 45% for independence, 55% against. To the ex-unionists I interviewed, this had felt like stepping back from the vertiginous cliff edge (Knight 2021, 10), from the chaos and uncertainty that Scottish independence would have brought. Their European future secured and the status quo unaltered, they had welcomed the stability that the unionist campaign had promised them. This, Ann always stressed, was her main motivation for voting against independence in 2014 and maintaining a strong unionist position until Brexit. She often discussed this point with both fellow SNP newcomers and those she encountered during street campaigning that were once staunchly anti-independence and now found themselves on the fence. Two years after the independence referendum unionists had once again found themselves at the cliff edge, promises of European membership and stability taken away by the very politicians who had preached them; Scotland – that voted 62% in favour of remaining in the EU – left Europe against its will after all. 'Do you feel betrayed?' I asked an ex-unionist who approached the SNP street stall Ann and I were in charge of during the 2019 general election, 'I feel lost' they replied, 'the country I thought I lived in no longer exists ... maybe it never did'.

The emergent axiom of violence being discussed here is one of rupture, born from a destabilisation of social knowledge through a crisis of social judgement (Roitman 2013),

in which time is rendered plural and kaleidoscopic – ‘possible futures running back to reconsidered pasts’ and destabilising the imagined community of the nation (Greenhouse 2019, 71). For my informants, this meant that the future of an isolationist, xenophobic nation that Brexit Britain offered left them having to reconsider their past support for independence, as well as their previous identity as British rather than Scottish, turning Brexit into a highly personal crisis encompassing political beliefs and identity politics.

This disconnect is one that echoed with many unionists. To them, the moment of Brexit constituted the brutal form of discontinuity that sudden political rupture brings with it, whilst simultaneously opening up a space for the transformation of social and political conceptions (Holbraad et al. 2019). It brought into ‘instant sensational visibility’ the political divides between Scotland and the rest of the UK. The Brexit campaign led by the far-right UK Independence Party (UKIP), was strongly isolationist, often racist, xenophobic, and hinted at imperialistic nostalgia (Evans 2017). It routinely alluded to the UK’s past greatness with slogans such as ‘Make Britain Great Again’ and ‘Take Back Control’. Racist imagery and rhetoric were used to stoke anti-immigration feelings such as the now infamous Brexit billboard which featured a vast queue of brown male faces framed by red writing reading ‘Breaking Point’.

For the majority of Scottish unionists who did not identify with this message, it was a difficult realisation that the country they had deliberately chosen to so strongly identify themselves with in 2014 had voted for a right-wing Brexit. They found themselves having to reconsider the position they had so carefully and emotionally taken during the independence referendum. Their rejection of the isolationist nationalism championed by the Brexit vote ironically pushed them towards the (Scottish) nationalism they had rejected only two years prior. Many expressed shock at the implications of Brexit; ‘Oh god it’s a nightmare’ an ex-unionist stated during an SNP canvassing run. Triggered by a pro-Boris Johnson poster proudly displayed on a window we had just passed, he lamented Brexit and the subsequent fallout, despairing, as he saw no way out other than Scottish independence: ‘like a real nightmare, one that you dream, how is this [Brexit] happening?’. However, unlike a real nightmare, there is no possibility of waking up from Brexit and have the country ‘go back to normal’. Even if Brexit ended up not going ahead, all my informants stressed, the UK would never be the same. Brexit exposed an imperialist and xenophobic side of the UK that was here to stay. As Madeline Reeves points out ‘the Leave campaign’s call to “take back control” has given form and solidarity to undercurrents of fear, disillusion and xenophobia that won’t easily now be contained’ (2016, 480). The temporality of Brexit for unionists was one of sudden rupture, very much a violent ‘event’ that was unforeseen until the morning the result was announced. Their reaction was overwhelmingly one of shock and disbelief at being blindsided. However, for other factions of SNP supporters, Brexit surpassed its event-like status, representing the most recent episode in the long history of colonial violence administered by Westminster against Scotland.

Slow Violence

Perceptions of Brexit Amongst Veteran SNP Activists

Amongst veteran pro-independence nationalists in Scotland, Brexit was perceived in a very different light, the axiomatic violence having a longer temporality, emerging to

the fore with the Brexit vote. It is a state of violence they perceive to be slow and accretive, its dire repercussions playing out across a large temporal scale (Nixon 2011). For Scottish nationalists, Brexit brought no rupture, no discontinuity or heightened sense of the present. Instead, in the immediate aftermath of Brexit the feeling amongst my Edinburgh informants was one of quiet resentment and exasperation, the air thick with unspoken 'I-told-you-so's'.

SNP supporters have long subscribed to a narrative of internal colonialism in Scotland, an understanding of history that drives their visions of nationalism and relationships with Westminster and the rest of the UK. They perceive Scotland to represent the textbook example of internal colonisation, the Scots being the receivers of 'discrimination against culturally distinct peoples who have been forced onto less accessible inferior lands' (Hechter 1999, 32) as a result of centuries of British imperial rule. This is a position my informants would reinforce by citing the recent voting discrepancies between Scotland and England – the large population of England dictating political outcomes for the whole of the UK – and by highlighting the ways in which the UK wishes to continue being an imperial power. These beliefs run deep amongst veteran party activists, who spent a large amount of time researching historical documents in search for concrete proof of this internal colonialism.

During my fieldwork, such practices culminated in a pro-independence exhibition set up by a group of amateur historians who had done extensive research into British military posts built in Scotland following the 1707 Acts of Union in which Scotland and England unified. They called these military posts 'English settlements' and marked them on various maps of Scotland which were displayed alongside information posters on the 'British military invasion'. Such were the terms that Dave, one of the amateur historians involved in the creation of the exhibition, used when showing me around. 'Does this look like an equal union to you?' he gestured angrily at the maps,

this is no union, this is an invasion plain and simple, imagine being a peasant and having all this military around you. There has never been a union, it's always been an invasion, controlling us from London, it's the same story as now.

Although Dave did not mean this in the literal sense of current physical and military invasion, he, and his fellow SNP peers, believed the current Brexit disparities between England and Scotland, where Scotland was being forced to leave the EU by the English vote, to be an extension of this forceful invasion they saw in their military maps: 'it's in the head, and in the politics, how they ration our money, and now Brexit'. The emergent aspect of this axiomatic violence was simply that now, with Brexit, everyone else would realise that people like Dave were right all along, as the dramatic vote brought underlying historical power discrepancies to the fore for all to see.

The validities of these claims of colonisation are still highly contested by historians, with no consensus reached (see Connell 2004; Jackson and Maley 2002). Those who agree defend that English imperialist practices were implemented across Scotland, with lasting consequences today; the highland clearances (Kenrick 2011), the loss of Gaelic, and 'English' military bases on Scottish land (Mackinnon 2018) are a few of the examples commonly cited. SNP supporters take this a step further, arguing that the invisible hand of British internal colonialism is still at play, permeating all aspects of life. This is most reminiscent of the banal nationalism described by Billig (1995) where small everyday

displays of Britishness are understood as coercive colonialist measures (see Herzfeld 2002 on crypto-colonialism).⁴ From anger at seeing a Union Jack instead of a Saltire printed on Scottish produce at the supermarket, to Scottish money being viewed with suspicion in England, or the Union Jack flown at the local council building being bigger than the Saltire flying next to it – the UK rules Scotland. To them, however, this is nowhere more obvious than in the perceived *democratic* imbalance between Scotland and England, where they believe Scotland to have been ruled by a right-wing, neo-colonial English political class for decades.

Nationalists in Scotland have historically regarded Westminster as a right-wing stronghold and have routinely resented the English for voting-in a Conservative government Scotland did not want. Scottish nationalists are not wrong in their analysis of historical voting pattern discrepancies between England and Scotland. The last time Scotland voted for a Conservative government was in 1955, however, since then they have been ruled by a Conservative UK government for over 45 years.⁵ Further, the Conservative governments that Scotland did not vote for have historically come accompanied by dire cuts to social welfare and industry in Scotland. This political disconnect and its socioeconomic consequences for Scotland slowly inflamed civic-nationalist sentiments north of the border. Informants within the SNP tell me of being victims of a Parliament they did not vote for, of feeling governed by a far-away power, of ‘Westminster rule’. Feelings of despondency and anger are common, their memories of this ‘Westminster rule’ over Scotland going back generations. In this way, for SNP activists, democracy has been long dead in Scotland, with the invisible imperialist hand of the Westminster Parliament chipping away at their democratic and social powers for decades, if not centuries.

It is this perception of the slow erosion of Scottish powers, history and identity by the UK government that impacts their perception of Brexit, rendering it in many ways a ‘quasi-event’; an event in which deferral, attrition, accumulation and ordinariness is their violence (Ahmann 2018; Povinelli 2011). Similarly to Nixon, Berlant tells us that slow violence refers to a general wearing out, ‘to deterioration as defining condition of ... historical existence’ (2011, 95). Instead of spectacular and instantaneous, its slow pace decouples consequence from its original cause, making it hard to perceive, and even harder to point out. In this way, instead of the unionists’ sudden explosive violence explored above, nationalists see Brexit within a different temporality: as the culmination of the slow violence of British colonialism and the English right-wing rule they have been subjected to for centuries.

Axiomatic in its historical and cultural depth, they believe this violence only emerged into the view of the general population when the ‘English’ vote to leave the EU forced the hand of the ‘Scottish’ consensus. As such, the axiomatic violence of Brexit is symptomatic of the ‘now’ moment of 2016 onwards, but with much deeper roots than the one-off explosive event experienced by Unionists like Ann. The racist, right wing, and nostalgic empire rhetoric that defined Brexit came as no surprise for nationalists since it forms part of the slow violence of the British empire. Neither did it come as a shock that Scotland could vote to remain in the EU and yet be forced to leave as a result of the English (and to a minor degree Welsh) vote. In this way, amongst my SNP informants who had a long-term nationalist stance, Brexit was not an event of rupture, but more a particularly striking example of the issues they have been pointing out for decades, bringing these problems to the wider public conscience. As such, Brexit was seldom discussed among

nationalists outside the framework of its implications for Scottish independence. Further, throughout my fieldwork the idea that something like Brexit would have happened sooner or later permeated the conversations I had with long-term SNP activists.

In fact, Brexit often discussed by nationalists in a similar way to Joseph Masco's (2015) interpretation of the industrial 'lag'; the inevitable delay between events and their long-term repercussions inherent in the political process. To them, Brexit was the final explosive consequence of years of Conservative neo-liberal rule; a delayed but direct by-product of the Thatcherite policies of the 1980s and the nostalgia for the British empire. I was often told that 'all you had to do was pay attention [to the politics in England]', to know that 'Brexit had been long coming'. This lag that the rhythm of slow violence creates often leads to a decoupling of cause and effect, making it difficult to represent, and even perceive (Ahmann 2018). The resistance to slow violence involves the identification and exposure of this violence, teaching people to recognise the various connections between past and present, understanding the numerous minutiae of the present as part of a larger toxic environment (Murphy 2006). For Scottish nationalists, this has historically taken on the form of activism, door knocking and campaigning in spaces where they might hope to expose these patterns to unconvinced unionists. However, since the Brexit referendum, Scottish nationalists have moved away from mundane minutiae, using Brexit as the ultimate example of cumulative slow violence against Scotland. This is the very function of 'events' – they make a difference by exposing the order of things, rupturing the experience of routine (Sahlins 2000, 301).

The 'eventedness' of Brexit has materialised nationalist arguments of self-determination. Instead of alluding at abstract philosophical ideas of democracy, Scottish nationalists are now able to point to Brexit as the pinnacle of the democratic and ideological imbalance between Scotland and the UK as a whole. The axiomatic violence has been laid bare for all to see. The SNP are using Brexit to demonstrate these imbalances, not because it has presented a new perspective, but because it so strikingly exposes an old one.

Unlike the traumatic rupture that unionists experienced, then, the Scottish nationalists approached Brexit as what Ahmann (2018, 159) coins a moral punctuation: 'A specific marking of time that condenses protracted suffering and demands an ethical response eschewing the delays of political caution and the painstaking work of ensuring scientific certainty'. In the case of Brexit, the ethical demand being that of immediate Independence for Scotland, so that Scotland may remain in the EU as it has voted for. Brushing aside accusations of opportunism, the right wing, neo-imperialist politics of Brexit continue to be contested by the SNP, who offer a vision of Scotland as European, green, and socialist. They utilise their version of civic-nationalism as a tool for resistance towards more traditional right-wing nationalisms brewing in the UK, arguing that the only way to be truly pro-European and left-wing is now through independence.

The Violence in Waiting

Navigating Post-Brexit Britain: EU Migrants and SNP Activists

During my fieldwork, three years on from the Brexit vote, feelings of violent rupture shifted amongst unionists and remainers, replaced by a permanent state of anticipation as the UK continued to hover in the liminal threshold between the Brexit vote (2016) and

the Brexit date (2020). The political turmoil and unprecedented legal battles that followed the Brexit referendum result meant that the deadline to leave the EU was repeatedly delayed – from the original date of the 29th of March 2019 to the 12th of April 2019, the 31st of October 2019 and finally the 31st of January 2020, stretching ever further the timespace of liminality. During these months, momentum behind ‘remain’ campaigns such as the People’s Vote – who demanded a second referendum on the EU – deepened the feeling of uncertainty in my informants, both new and old SNP activists, who clinged to the faint glimmer of hope that Brexit would simply be ‘cancelled’. Conversely, such public movements resulted in a harder line towards Brexit being taken up by the government and increased the unrest and hostility felt by those who had voted to leave the EU who were anxious to ‘get Brexit done’.

This ever-extending liminal period marked by deep uncertainty and increasing hostilities towards EU migrants and remainers alike (Closs-Stephens 2016; Owen 2018) sparked a sense of anxiety for my SNP activists. As Boris Johnson gained popularity and the idea of an anti-immigration, hard-line ‘no deal’ Brexit gained traction, many began anticipating apocalyptic outcomes to Brexit. They imagined a country ruled by lawlessness and chaos, cut off from the world and left wanting for the most basic of needs, its citizens left fighting over commodities such as food, water and healthcare. Sitting at a coffee shop in Edinburgh I discussed such preparations with Alan, who had joined the SNP post-Brexit vote after some persuasion from Ann, with whom he shared an urgent and apocalyptic fear of the Brexit date. He was showing me a photograph of what looked to have once been a bedroom. Now, it held hundreds of boxes, piled high on each other, precariously balanced on every surface available, the floor no longer visible. ‘Is that all food?’ I asked incredulously. He looked at me with an amused twinkle in his eye ‘Aye food, and the last thing people think about – but the first thing they miss ... toilet paper!’. He is one of the many citizens who seriously worried about the ever-growing prospect of a ‘no deal’ Brexit, believing all trade of goods would immediately cease on the day the UK left the EU, leaving the UK ‘as if under siege, people will be fighting for food! ... they will deploy the army ... it will be apocalyptic,’ he concluded. Alan was not alone in his anticipation of violence, both from the state and disorderly citizens, on ‘Brexit day’, stoked by rumours at the time that the government would have the army on standby to prevent riots and civil unrest (BBC 2019). Collective anticipation of this apocalyptic horizon spread, resulting in numerous businesses selling ‘Brexit survival kits’ comprising of basic foods, a water filter and a fire starter kit, painting a rather apocalyptic image of a ‘post-Brexit Britain’. As an SNP Edinburgh councillor put it to me at one of our local SNP monthly meetings: ‘We are doomed if we do [Brexit] and we are doomed if we don’t’, referring to the widespread belief that violence would break out whether Brexit happened or not.

The anticipation of violence was particularly salient amongst European migrants living in Scotland, whose future had become deeply uncertain.⁶ Unsure whether they would be allowed to remain post-Brexit, many put their whole lives on hold, stagnated, waiting for some clarity on the future that would allow them to act. After years of being denied a guarantee to remain in the UK after Brexit, and politicians accusing the government of employing ‘inhumane’ tactics to use migrant rights as ‘hostages’ in the Brexit negotiations (Brooks and Severin 2016; Reed-Danahay 2020) many EU

migrants began anticipating mass deportations taking place after Brexit, their right to remain in the UK instantly revoked. Ana, a schoolteacher and French EU migrant from Edinburgh who joined the SNP post-Brexit doesn't know what a Brexit nation will look like, but she knows it will be violent for people like her. She talked, dismayed, about her contract not being renewed, as her school feared she wouldn't be able to work after 31 October 2019 (the Brexit date at the time, this date was later extended to 31 January 2020). She talked of cancelling her Christmas holiday abroad as she feared she would not be allowed to return to the UK, and now avoids speaking French in public transport, fearing ethnic discrimination and attacks. The constant anticipation of xenophobia both from those around her who voted for Brexit and from the government implementing it left her, and others, feeling like she suddenly lived in a hostile environment in which she must modify her behaviour to survive, a feeling shared by EU migrants across the UK (Reed-Danahay 2020). The violence after the event is elongated, stretching into all perceptions of the future. Both emergent and axiomatic, the violence of Brexit is directly impacting how people like Ana plan their lives.

This collective anticipation of an apocalyptic end had been slowly building since 2016 and thrived in the seemingly ever-expanding threshold of Brexit negotiations. Although the triggering of article 50 (the UK's formal withdrawal request to the EU) happened with surprising speed, the country since then seemed stagnated, suspended in the liminal period of negotiation. It was neither in the EU nor out, and the Brexit deadline for exiting the EU had been repeatedly pushed back due to numerous political impasses unprecedented in modern UK history. This meant that some people, particularly EU migrants, developed a deep sense of elongated crisis. All of my informants felt stuck, paralysed by the uncertainty and 'not knowing' the future. At a time of such uncertainty, 'we acquire a sense that what we do in this present will be decisive for both the past and the future, giving to the present the status of a threshold' (Bryant 2016, 20). When collective, this liminal period takes on the quality of a shared experienced time; a 'Time of Brexit' (Knight 2017) punctuated by its disposition of violence, anticipation, and uncertainty. Much like Hobbes' 'time of war', which he defines as 'times of immediacy and of a known disposition to fight, even if no actual clash takes place' (Bryant and Knight 2019, 30; see also Hobbes 1962), a 'Time of Brexit', is an epoch that can be defined not simply by the violence that occurs during it, but by the very anticipation of it as it builds in these periods of transition, creating a 'mounting sense of danger and suspense' characteristic of Turner's periods of crisis (Reed-Danahay 2020).

Mainly, however, migrants talked about the exhaustion of waiting to know their future in the UK. Waiting through uncertainty constitutes a sense of 'social entrapment' (Crapanzano 1985) which renders people unable to envision themselves and their futures, leaving people feeling beaten down and overpowered in what Luhmann (2006) described as 'social defeat'. Being made to wait is 'inextricably bound up in power relations and is associated with bureaucratic domination', where occasional glimmers of hope for eventual change form part of the technique of control (Griffiths 2014, 1996). Much like asylum seekers in the US, EU migrants in Scotland reported experiencing this 'Time of Brexit' as a state of 'existential limbo' (Haas 2017) in which they were neither citizens of the UK, nor illegal migrants, powerless to do nothing but wait for this liminal period to end, one way or another. Forced into living with a 'dual uncertainty of

time’ in which change is both imminent and absent (Griffiths 2014, 1) recurring glimmers of hope for certainty of their futures – be it from the People’s Vote campaign or a Brexit deal – kept them in temporal suspension, actively waiting for change. This process of an unending transformation, of a limbo with no end, created a state of perpetual liminality where the lack of a clear ‘leading out’ path toward an endpoint resulted in feelings of crisis and chaos (Szakolczai 2000; Laurie 2018).

This sense of perpetual liminality left migrants trapped in what Griffiths (2014) calls ‘directionless stasis’, a state that is debilitating (Rainbird 2014) inciting fatigue, demotivation, anger and even feelings of torture and cruelty (Haas 2017). Many SNP-supporting migrants I interviewed in Edinburgh spoke of the cruelty of waiting for Brexit; ‘I’m just so exhausted’ and ‘I just want it to stop’ are pleas that were made with increasing frequency as the period of waiting increased. During one such interview I asked a Spanish migrant that I had met at a monthly SNP activist meeting how he felt about his wait being extended after the Brexit date was pushed back a second time. Taking a shaky breath, he reflected: ‘I don’t think I can do it ... I don’t think I can take it any longer, it’s too much’. For him, as for many others, living in a state of limbo is made painful not only because of the precarious condition it represents, but because of the perceived lack of personal control over the situation. Further, not only was the uncertainty of this extended liminal period paralysing and exhausting, it was punctuated by an ever-growing fear of what the future might bring, and the possibility of a ‘no deal’ Brexit. With Boris Johnson eventually elected as UK prime minister in 2019, many EU migrants fear that racism is at their door. A man known to have called French people ‘turds’, likened women wearing burkas to ‘letterboxes’ and referred to black people as having ‘watermelon smiles’, Boris Johnson championed the hardest of Brexits, leaving all SNP activists, to one extent or another, anticipating a future of prejudice where EU migrants were not only unwelcome, but actively discriminated against.

Looking for a way to break free from this stagnating period of liminal waiting, many – both EU migrants and ex-unionists who voted to remain a part of the UK in 2014 – joined the SNP as a form of resistance. The number of EU migrants at local SNP meetings has noticeably increased since 2016, most of them citing Brexit and the SNP’s response to it as the main incentive to join. They often talked about ‘fighting back’ and finding refuge in Scotland from the ‘madness down below’ (in England). Some of these newcomers to the party were English nationals who very consciously described themselves as ‘political refugees’, deliberately migrating to Scotland and joining the SNP because of its ‘sensible approach to Brexit’. For most, it is the act of purposefully campaigning against Brexit and for independence that allows them to feel like they have regained some control and agency in this ‘Time of Brexit’.

Conclusion

In Brexit Britain there are three distinct yet interconnected forms of emergent axiomatic violence, dependant on perspective, each with their own temporal pivot. In all cases, the impact of ‘Brexit time’ on Scottish politics and the positioning of the SNP has been clear. As people deal with unprecedented change in their daily lives, leaving the EU has once again brought the possibility of Scottish independence into frontline politics. The right

wing, isolationist and often racist and xenophobic rhetoric associated with Brexit has left many in Scotland re-considering their previous unionist positions from 2014.

In the view of ex-unionists in Scotland, Brexit represents a sudden rupture, an explosive and unexpected event that emerged unsighted from left-field to wreck their long-held perceptions of life in the UK. As such, the violence emerges from present concerns, it is of the here-and-now. For them, Brexit is being lived as an explosive exposure of a UK they did not believe to exist, a Britain that is isolationist and inward-looking rather than pro-European and cosmopolitan. The establishment of Brexit as the 'new normal' in British politics has caused a re-alignment of political values in Scotland amongst many who voted against independence but now see the Brexit fallout as embedded in emergent axiomatic violence in British politics against liberal values and immigrant lives. Having been promised a stable future in the EU if they voted against independence in 2014, the sudden disappearance of that future which had seemed sealed was a drastic form of discontinuity, best characterised as violent rupture. The traumatic descriptions of my informants waking up to a 'Brexit Britain' are illustrative of the painful tearing of the social imaginary experienced by unionists.

In contrast, for nationalists, the axiomatic violence has deep historical roots, emerging to the front of wider public consciousness with the Brexit vote. For veteran SNP activists, who have been decrying the democratic imbalance between Scotland and the rest of the UK, Scotland having to leave the EU alongside the rest of the UK even though it strongly voted to remain is not surprising, but simply shines a spotlight on deep historical concerns. To them, the 'emergent' violence of Brexit is the washing away of superficial promises of equality offered by Westminster to reveal the centuries of slow violence imposed on them by the 'colonial British state', as SNP activists would say.

Finally, EU migrants living in the UK project the violence forward into their future plans for work and family. In the gap between Brexit vote and actually leaving the EU, migrants experienced the violence of anticipation, which has become a permanent state for many foreigners planning their stay on British shores.

It would be easy to gloss political schisms such as Brexit as one event giving way to 'emergent axiomatic violence' in the singular. However, as my work with SNP activists reveals, the interpretation of the violent nature of the political moment is multifaceted, with different temporal depths and rhythms. Dependant on perspective, axiomatic violence may emerge from the event to take people by complete surprise, rocking their life-worlds as explosive rupture; alternatively, the emergence may be seen as the culmination of decades, if not centuries, of slow violence eroding away at the social fabric. Further, many SNP activists now share the outlook of the most recent party members, the disenfranchised EU citizens, in experiencing axiomatic violence as structurally embedded in how they anticipate shared futures of Scotland within Brexit Britain.

Notes

1. Their relationship with the New Labour government (1997–2010) was fraught, with most SNP members claiming that the New Labour government was not truly left-wing, a position they felt was reinforced following New Labour's support for the Iraq War which triggered a mass exodus of members from Scottish Labour. Many defected to the SNP.

2. The large population in England and its overall pro-Brexit stance strongly swayed the overall UK result towards leaving the EU. Because of this, many of my informants blamed England specifically for Brexit, a narrative that played well into the SNP's stance on the democratic imbalances between England, Scotland, and the rest of the UK. SNP activists often flipped between the terms 'England', 'Westminster' and 'Britain', which they used interchangeably. SNP activists argue that given the huge sway the English vote has over the rest of UK politics, it is accurate to equate Westminster, English, and British politics.
3. Internal polling carried out by the SNP immediately after the Brexit referendum indicated that up to 30% of SNP members had voted to leave the EU – most of these votes coming from the North and North-East of Scotland. 2018 internal polling regarding Scotland re-joining the EU as an independent country was met with a much lower 12% disapproval of the EU, an indication that in-party rumours I often heard my activist informants voice of members tactically voting for Brexit in order to destabilise the UK were – at least in part – true.
4. Of course, as Laura Cram (2001) points out, banal Europeanism is also extensively used by states such as Scotland and in particular political parties like the SNP who frame news about the EU as 'home news', and claims to speak with a European voice that is naturalised through media, funding, elections and discourse.
5. It is worth noting that although this is the case when looking at the British first past the post system, in terms of percentage of votes the total conservative votes exceeded the total left-wing votes in 1959.
6. At the time of writing (February 2020), migrant futures in the UK still remain deeply uncertain, with many having been denied 'settled status' in the UK, whilst many others worry they will not meet the new 'points based' criteria being introduced by the government.

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